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THE MYSTERY OF LINCOLN

By Robert E. Knowles

THERE are few things in life so fascinating as the study of the secret of greatness. The world is never weary of digging and delving in that mysterious soil wherein the life of a great man has struck its hidden roots. A great man, we say —how carelessly oftentime, with but little sense of the significance of the term. For every truly great man stands before us a mystery, something for which we can not account, endowed with certain powers—or, better still, with power, a nameless attribute—which betokens the special favour of the Infinite. Every truly great man, said one of the greatest, Thomas Carlyle, is a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide us across this wilderness of life.

The element of mystery wraps the lives of the transcendant. We can but dimly wonder how they achieve the great results that seem to come so easily from their hands. What tools they work with, by what rule, under what inspiration to other men denied, we may not know. It is popular nowadays to account for great

achievements in terms of great industry; so much so, indeed, that most people are convinced that genius is "an infinite capacity for taking pains." This is a shallow proverb, and untrue. Genius—fruitful genius at least—goes hand in hand with industry; but industry, however passionate and sustained, cannot cope with that unearned increment of nature which we call genius for want of a better word. As well might swift and tireless walking cope with wings. A mediocre man may toil terribly; but a genius need not be idle the while—and he has his genius to the good. Let industry try its hand at the muse and give another "Cottar's Saturday Night"; let it cultivate an infinite capacity for taking pains and furnish another Gettysburg Address, before we accept it as the synonym for genius. Meantime we will repeat the adage, strangely unfamiliar as it is, that genius does what it must and talent does what it can; which, if it be true, presumes the presence of the Infinite—and lands us in the realm of mystery at once.

It is doubtful if history has produced a more mysterious personality than that which was incarnate in the long, gaunt, uncouth form of the man whose hundredth birthday will engage the attention of the world on the approaching 12th of February. Abraham Lincoln has been defined, and justly, as "the first American"—but he is far more than that. Of exclusively English stock, he is one of the most wonderful blooms of the parent stem. He is one of the greatest products of the Anglo-Saxon race. He is one of the few marvellous births of our common humanity.

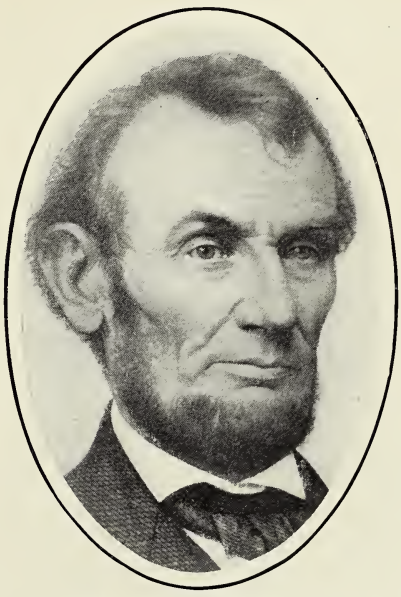
ABRAHAM LINCOLN, WITH "TAD." THE BOOK IS THE BIBLE

And the spell that Abraham Lincoln exercises over all the world is undoubtedly bound up with the mystery of the man. Somewhat more than a thousand different biographers have tried their hand at its solution, but in vain. With reverent curiosity some, and with complacent smartness others, but all have sought to trace to their hidden source the sagacity, the eloquence, the insight, the humanity, the wit, the brooding tenderness—in a word, the power—of this unexplainable child of nature.

Let the mystery be outlined. Behold, a little more than a century ago, a log cabin, its solitary window of greased paper admitting the light of day amid the semi-wildness of a Kentucky clearance. Two inmates there, and newly-wed. The husband, Thomas Lincoln by name, is a poor specimen of the "poor whites," synonym for ignorance and superstition to half a continent. To the day of his death he could neither read nor write. His wife, Nancy Hanks before her marriage, herself first saw the light through a cloud of obscurity and shame. Her mother's name (Lucy Hanks) was of dread similarity to her own. The husband could not write his name; the wife scarcely dared.

It was on February 12th, 1809, that the first wail of the hapless infant floated through the miserable cabin. This infant was named Abraham for his father's father; which said grandfather had been killed and scalped by an Indian savage. Eight years flit by, and the lonely child has grown fast—a solitary child, his playground the sombre forest amid which the rude

shanty nestles. When eight years of age, in 1817, the little family moves, raft-borne along the stream, into the unbroken wilderness of Indiana. Again a log cabin serves as home, humbler than its predecessor—only three sides enclosed, the fourth open to the weather. A central fireplace pours its smoke forth through the open roof; the boy's bed, straw-built, is on some boards that rest on the rough rafters beneath the roof, and he climbs to it with the aid of a few pegs driven into the mud between the logs. But Abraham Lincoln grows, long, lank, leathery, with tanned and swarthy face crowned by a great shock of wiry, rebellious hair. The days and months pass by; the boy's mother falls sick. One midnight he is wakened to stand by the dying form, weeping. The yearning eyes look out on the boy's tear-stained face as he stands, scantily apparelled, in the candle's uncertain light. Still gazing, the mother's soul passes out into the Silent Kingdom, and the tears flow faster down the face that is yet to be familiar to latest generations. Six months later, the orphan plods fifty miles through the wilds and returns with a wandering Methodist preacher; the belated funeral service is held by the now greening grave in the glade of an Indiana forest.



MR. ROBERT LINCOLN, THE EMANCIPATOR'S SON, REGARDS THIS AS THE BEST PHOTOGRAPH EVER TAKEN OF HIS FATHER

The years pass by, years of labour as a hired hand. Out of them all, young Lincoln snatches something less than nine months of schooling—eight miles a day he walks, to and from the forest school. The nights, unwasted too, find him prone on the earthen floor, reading what books he can by the light of the cabin fire—the Bible, Æsop's Fables, Pilgrim's Progress, form the scanty library.

The year of grace 1830 comes—and the roving Thomas Lincoln moves again. Illinois this time provides the far-off fields of green. Buckskin breeches, coarse rawhide boots—stockings none—blue smock and copious cap of coonskin make up the dress of an ungainly youth of twenty-one, already six feet four, who waves his goad and plies his voice above a laggard yoke of oxen as the canvas-covered wagon makes its creaking way over the unpeopled prairie. That ox driver is yet to be called the Great Emancipator. Squatting at last, he splits the rails that fenced half of his father's new-acquired farm; tiring of this he turns river boy for a time, finally engaged to pole a raft down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Here slavery, grim and lurid, breaks upon him; here he registers his vow in Heaven to fight it unto death, but still clad in buckskin breeches and blue smock and coonskin cap.

Back by river to St. Louis—from St. Louis overland, and on foot, he makes his way to the Illinois hamlet of New Salem. Fifteen houses compose the village. Abraham Lincoln goes to work again, hired by this farmer and that, rail-splitting, drain-digging, cattle-tending. Suddenly comes a vacancy in the village store—he is employed. Finds a set of Blackstone at the bottom of a desert-

ed hogshead, containing much beside —and devours Blackstone, the rest ignored. Postmastership falls vacant —Lincoln is appointed; no office needed, nor indeed possible; carries letters about in his hat and delivers them at sight—but reads all papers before surrendering! Then he learns, furtively, the surveyor's science; secures instruments, which are presently seized for debt. Reads law diligently, building meantime an occasional pigsty, or splitting rails for the defenceless acres here and there. Then comes the year of grace 1837, wherein Abraham Lincoln presents himself before an obscure lawyer in Springfield —examination satisfactory, interview most social, probably moist—and the still blue-jeaned Lincoln is admitted to the Bar.

Behold a scene in April of this same 1837. Miscellaneous country store, kept by one Joshua Speed. It is evening, and the door slowly opens. Enter the lank, gaunt figure of a sad-faced man of twenty-eight, carrying a saddlebag; which saddlebag contains all his earthly possessions. He walks timidly toward the waiting Speed, his great form looming large in the twilight. He would know the cost of furnishing a bed, for he purposes to try to live in the village as a lawyer. Speed calculates, soiling a square foot of good brown paper the while. Seventeen dollars, quoth he. Abaraham Lincoln admits, sadly, that so much money he does not possess —nor sees likelihood of possessing. If Mr. Speed would trust him he might some day pay. Speed would trust him. Lincoln repents himself and says, sadly too, that he does not care to begin with so much of debt; starts silently for the door. Speed studies the face in the semi-darkness; calls him back; he has a bed of his own upstairs, he says, and the stranger is welcome to half of it till he gets a foothold. Lincoln demurs, then accepts, mumbling his thanks the while—the saddlebag is borne aloft to the room; and Speed knew not, through the long four years that followed, that he lay night by night beside one of the Immortals, toward whom the eyes of future generations should be backward turned in reverence.

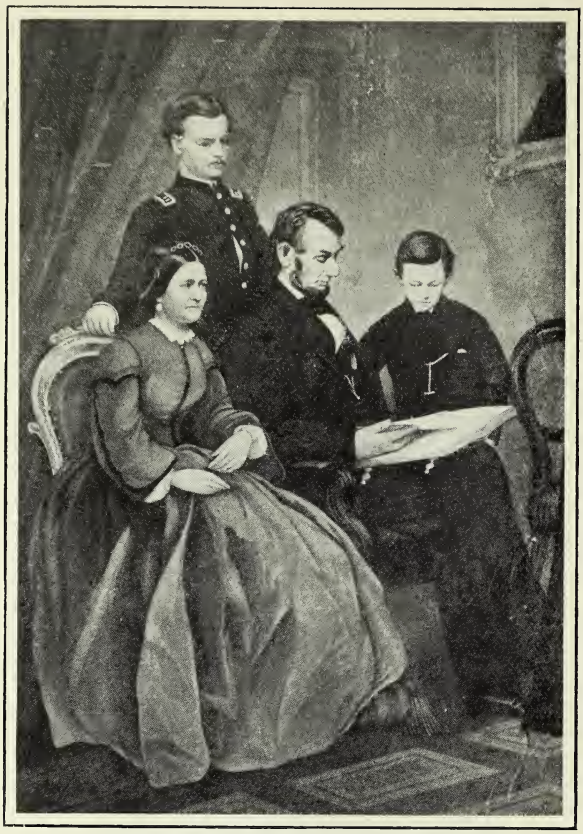
Long years after Lincoln's martyr crown was won, Joshua Speed referred to this life-romance in words like these: "I remember his face as he came into my store that April evening. I slept beside him for four years. And now I can hardly realise it. To think that he was dependent on me for a place to lay his head, all his worldly goods in the saddlebag that lay upon the floor—and then to recall that I lived to visit him in the White House as President of the United States, to see him holding his own with the greatest statesmen of Europe, making and unmaking generals and admirals, holding his Cabinet of stalwarts in the hollow of his hand, carrying in his bosom the greatest war of history, despatching ambassadors to foreign courts and dispensing the patronage of his august office, directing the legislation of a nation, holding in his hands the fortunes of millions and the lives of tens of thousands, affixing his signature to a document that gave liberty to four millions of the human race, saving an empire to itself and to the cause of liberty, and, at last, his country delivered and his cause triumphant, dying amid the grief and reverence of Christendom—all this is more like a dream than reality."

Marvellous indeed was it all, as his old bed-fellow might well exclaim. Herein lies the charm of Lincoln's chequered story—in its mystery. We do not marvel greatly at the career, for instance, of such a man as Gladstone. Born in the same year as Lincoln, 1809, when 1832 arrived Gladstone had passed through Oxford with singular distinction, one of the first scholars of his age. He had travelled far, had drunk from almost every spring of learning on the Continent, had acquired many languages,

had shared the stimulating friendship of men like Kinglake and Newman and Tennyson, and had taken his seat in the House of Commons as the nominee of the Duke of Newcastle. In that same year, 1832, Lincoln was heard to say: "I've a notion to study English grammar if I knew where I could get one." Someone told him that an old school-master, Mentor Graham, seven miles afield, had such a thing; and that same night Lincoln traversed the fourteen miles to borrow the precious volume. Such was the handicap of his beginning — and how swiftly he overtook his great contemporary all the world knows now. Gladstone himself, Nestor though he was, has left no contribution to political oratory, to human literature, such as fell from the lips of this untutored orator, who said: "He that would be no slave must have no slave"; or again, "What is inherently right is politically safe"; or again, "Let us highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain . . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth"; or again, and noblest of them all, "With malice towards none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us seek to finish the work we have begun." Montalembert commended Lincoln's style as a model for the imitation of princes. Probably none of Lincoln's varied gifts is so significant of his greatness as his wonderful power with words. Many of his phrases have become part of the daily speech of mankind. Few had so quick and reverent a sense of the wizardry of language, few could detect with so delicate an instinct the opal shades of words. Witness his well-known revisal of Secretary Seward's letter to the English Government concerning the Trent affair; Lincoln's verbal genius made the difference between peace and war. But doubtless his greatest triumph in this realm was won in his Gettysburg Address. From that same platform Edward Everett, one of the most eloquent *litterateurs* of the day, delivered a speech of two hours and a quarter in duration — now no man knows its sepulchre. Lincoln jotted his on the back of an envelope as the train bore him toward the battlefield; it occupied two minutes in delivery, but the English-speaking world has memorised it, and Immortality has "taken it out of Time's careless keeping into her own."

WILKES BOOTH, WHO ASSASSINATED LINCOLN

We look in vain for adequate provocation for Lincoln's separate powers. Whether it be as statesman, or orator, or diplomat, or commander, or wit, or seer, the contemplation of his strength and triumphs baffles our understanding. From such depths derived, to such heights ascending, his flight mocks the eye of reason. An untried country lawyer, he was



ABRAHAM LINCOLN, HIS WIFE AND TWO SONS

thrust to the nation's helm amid such a storm as seldom ever smote a people; the plain man of the prairies was called, as in a single night, to responsibility as great as was ever laid on human shoulders. And with what majesty of self-control he climbed the dizzy heights! Napoleon's power made him drunken, as with wine—and he betrayed his people, snatching greedily at Imperial glory, and fell prone at last. But Lincoln's great nature took on new humility, new unselfishness, new beauty, as he trod the dread wine-press alone. The farther his genius removed him from "the plain people," as he loved to call them, the nearer did he come to them in the deep kinship of humanity.

Many and different have been the theories advanced in explanation of the mysterious resource that marked the *régime* of this strange product of the forest. But the secret still is hidden. Uneducated, yet a master of letters; unfamiliar with many books, yet a kind of modern Æsop in homely wisdom; untrained in diplomacy, yet more than a match for Seward and Chase and the most cultured Parliamentarians of his day; reared amid the most primitive influences, yet familiar with every aspect of human life and almost every current of the human heart; struggling fiercely from infancy against obscurity and poverty —often too against ruthless men— yet aglow with humanity, a great and compassionate lover of the human

race; untutored in the ways of war, yet compelling the wondering confidence of generals in the field, the rail-splitter of the plains, the awkward man who at twenty-three was earning his eight dollars a month on the farm, became the uncrowned king of one of the strongest among nations, the Saviour of his country, the Emancipator of the enslaved, the Champion of Freedom to millions who never saw his face; became, in short, one of the greatest benefactors of the human race.

What approaches nearest to explanation of it all is, when stated, itself in terms of mystery. Yet there is no other. Abraham Lincoln was a separate gift from the hand of Him who maketh one star to differ from another star in glory. Raised up, as surely as was ever Moses of old, for the performance of a stupendous task, called from the silence and the dark of the western forest to the great theatre that awaited him, he was equipped by that Almighty hand according to his need, endowed by infinite love and wisdom for his mighty mission.

SING LOW, WILD BIRD!

By E. M. YEOMAN

Sing low, wild bird!—thine is the only sound
That stirs the holy hush that broods around
The quiet place beneath whose grasses lie
The beds of forms gone into dust and death.
Blend a low note with the faint west-wind's sigh,
And breathe a dirge for life that perisheth!

Sing low, wild bird; and sing a requiem o'er
For symphonies of life that are no more:
Laughter of children, and the patient song
Of crooning mothers, and the love-hushed tone
Of red-lipped lovers whispering low and long.
Sing low!—their lips are dust, and they are gone.

Sing low, wild bird!—they all are sunk beneath
These violets that languish into death.
Gone to Man's bourne are they, and secret Doom
Hath shown his pathway to their anxious eyes,
That haply leads to empty realms of gloom,
And haply to proud mansions in the skies.